

Merritt Parkway, Nichols-Shelton Road Bridge
Spanning the Merritt Parkway at the 34.15 mile mark
Trumbull
Fairfield County
Connecticut

HAER No. CT-125

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

Merritt Parkway, Nichols-Shelton Road Bridge

HAER No. CT-125

Location: Spanning the Merritt Parkway at the 34.15 mile mark in Trumbull, Fairfield County, Connecticut

UTM: 18.654050.4566535
Quad: Bridgeport, Connecticut

Construction Date: 1940

Engineer: Connecticut Highway Department

Architect: George L. Dunkelberger, of the Connecticut Highway Department, acted as head architect for all Merritt Parkway bridges.

Contractor: Mariani Construction Company
New Haven, Connecticut

Present Owner: Connecticut Department of Transportation
Wethersfield, Connecticut

Present Use: Demolished 1979

Significance: The bridges of the Merritt Parkway were predominately inspired by the Art Deco and Art Moderne architectural styles of the 1930s. Experimental forming techniques were employed to create the ornamental characteristics of the bridges. This, combined with the philosophy of incorporating architecture into bridge design and the individuality of each structure, makes them distinctive.

Historians: Todd Thibodeau, HABS/HAER Historian
Corinne Smith, HAER Engineer
August 1992

For more detailed information on the Merritt Parkway, refer to the Merritt Parkway History Report, HAER No. CT-63.

LOCAL HISTORY

In 1668, there were only five settlers living beyond the two-mile limit of the Stratford meeting house. Shortly after this date, the land north of Stratford was surveyed, laid out and assigned to individuals. It is unknown if anyone settled there before Abraham Nichols and his family arrived from Stratford in 1690. Other families soon followed, creating a district known as Nichols Farms.¹

As the population increased, the desire for a local church and government became evident. In 1725, Nichols Farms residents petitioned the General Court for village privileges and a committee was named to view their case. The General Assembly acted in favor of their petition and in October 1725 the Assembly granted the residents of Nichols Farms the "liberty of village privileges," as the Society of Unity. Unity was still a part of Stratford, but could maintain its own meeting house and school, through a local tax.²

At the same time, residents from Fairfield were clearing lands west of Unity. This area came to be known as the Long Hill region and faced many of the same problems as Nichols Farms. These settlers were forced to pay for a church and school that were too far away for them to use.³

In 1740 the General Assembly granted the Long Hill region an exemption from paying taxes for the school and meeting house in Stratfield, between December and mid March. Furthermore, Long Hill was allowed to develop its own meeting house during these months. Thus, the Winter Society of Long Hill was created; this arrangement continued for four years.

¹History of Trumbull: Dodrasquicentennial, 1797-1972, (Trumbull: Trumbull Historical Society, Inc., 1972), 25.

²History of Trumbull: Dodrasquicentennial, 26.

³David A. Cronin, "History of Trumbull, Connecticut," Historical Sketches of Trumbull, Connecticut: Tercentury Celebration, (Trumbull: The Trumbull Historical Committee, 1935), 5.

In 1744, the parishes of Unity and Long Hill, only five miles apart, were consolidated into the Society of North Stratford. The new society functioned in virtually the same manor as the Unity parish. As they were now allowed to manage their own religious and educational affairs, residents became anxious to obtain complete independence from Stratford. For more than fifty years North Stratford sought to become an individual township. In October 1797, the General Assembly passed the "Trumbull Bill" establishing the Society of North Stratford as the town of Trumbull.⁴

The Boston Post Road and the main line of the railroad both passed to the south of Trumbull, isolating the community as a rural farming region until the completion of the Merritt Parkway in 1940. Trumbull was the location the Connecticut Highway Department's main field office during the construction of the Merritt Parkway.

BRIDGE CONSTRUCTION HISTORY

The Nichols-Shelton Road starts in Stratford and goes north through the community of Nichols to the town of Shelton. The Peter Mitchell Construction Company of Greenwich, CT, received the contract to grade the Merritt Parkway from the Huntington Turnpike, in Trumbull, to the Cutspring Road, in Stratford (ConnDot project #180-130). While the Nichols-Shelton Road Bridge is located within this section of the Merritt, the grade separation and bridge contract went to the Mariani Construction Company of New Haven, CT.⁵ The bridge was completed in 1940. The paving work for this region of the Merritt also extended from Main Street/Route 25 to Cutspring Road. This contract was awarded to the Osborn-Barnes Construction Company of Danbury, CT (ConnDot project #180-169). The Nichols-

⁴History of Trumbull: Dodrasquicentennial, 28.

⁵Contract Card File, Map File and Engineering Records Department, Connecticut Department of Transportation, Wethersfield, CT.

Shelton Road Bridge was demolished in 1979 and replaced with a modern interchange in 1983.⁶

BRIDGE DESCRIPTION

The Nichols-Shelton Road Bridge was a double-span, reinforced-concrete, barrel-type rigid-frame bridge. Each frame spanned 38' at a skew of 10°-49'-56" over two lanes of the Merritt Parkway. Parallel wing walls formed the approach for the underpass. The bridge provided an 89' wide clear roadway for Nichols-Shelton Road.

The rigid-frame design differed from most of the other bridges on the Merritt Parkway because it was shaped like a segmental arch, instead of an arched beam, supported on short walls. (See the Merritt Parkway History Report, HAER No. CT-63, for a more detailed description of the rigid-frame.) The twin frames were completely independent except for a shared footing at the center pier. The walls, which were the frame legs, were less than 6' tall above the footing. The arches rose 13'-3" above the springline. The frame thickness increased from 1'-3" at the crown to over 2'-6" at the springline. The spandrels of the arch were filled with gravel and bounded by reinforced-concrete walls at the faces.

Five-foot wide vertical panels with chamfered edges covered the wing walls and spandrels and acted as the railing. The rhythm of the panels was broken by a 6'-6" wide panel at the crown of each span and a 2'-8-1/2" panel between the spans. Two bands of constant thickness traced the arched span.

⁶Nichols-Shelton Road Bridge, DOT #755; Bridge Maintenance File, Engineering Department, Connecticut Department of Transportation, Newington, CT.

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- Cronin, David A. "History of Trumbull, Connecticut." Historical Sketches of Trumbull, Connecticut: Tercentury Celebration. Trumbull: Trumbull Historical Committee, 1935.
- , History of Trumbull: Dodrasquicentennial, 1797-1972. Trumbull: The Trumbull Historical Society, Inc., 1972.
- , Contract Card File. Map File and Engineering Records Department, Connecticut Department of Transportation: Wethersfield, CT. This includes construction drawings, copies of which are in the HAER field records.
- , Bridge Maintenance File. Engineering Department, Connecticut Department of Transportation: Newington, CT.

PROJECT INFORMATION

This recording project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey and the Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) Division of the National Park Service, Robert J. Kapsch, Chief. The Merritt Parkway recording project was sponsored and funded by the Connecticut Department of Transportation (ConnDot) and the Federal Highway Administration.

The fieldwork, measured drawings, historical reports and photographs were prepared under the general direction of Eric N. DeLony, HAER Chief, and Sara Amy Leach, HABS Historian.

The recording team consisted of Jacqueline A. Salame (Columbia University), architect and field supervisor; Mary Elizabeth Clark (Pratt Institute) and B. Devon Perkins (Yale University), architectural technicians; Joanne McAllister-Hewlings (US/ICOMOS-Great Britain, University of Sheffield), landscape architect; Corinne Smith (Cornell University), engineer; Gabrielle M. Esperdy (City University of New York) and Todd Thibodeau (Arizona State University), historians; and Jet Lowe, HAER photographer.